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Australian Landscape Architecture in China

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Urbanisation of the Chinese landscape continues at a great pace. Landscape architecture is only a newly recognized profession here, in contemporary practice terms at least, but our expertise is in great demand. However only some Australian companies and a few Australian expats have managed to overcome the complexities of working in the Chinese context. It is worthwhile knowing how some of these individuals reflect on working in China and what they consider to be our strongest areas of expertise here.

Migrating to China - Reverse Culture Shock

Australian practitioners have typically developed expertise in a full range of project services from regional planning, master planning, detailed design, construction documentation to on-site implementation and assessment in Australia and other Western countries. In China, however, this practice continuum is often far more fractured and on-site outcomes far less predictable than in Australia. A great deal of work may be done to produce planning and design concept proposals for competition, tender or negotiation. Work may then cease for a considerable period of time before starting up again to meet very tight deadlines. The client may involve many disparate companies in unexpected ways and ask for many variations to the original concept throughout the entire process. Australians require a different cultural understanding of landscape planning, design and construction in the face of what may seem to be a very confusing and frustrating development process in China.

Inward Looking – Outward Looking

Highly acclaimed traditional garden design work in China was largely undertaken in the private realm of wealthy families. James Brearley, Principal at BAU International, suggests that today Chinese developers still favor design concepts that have an inward-looking rather than outward-looking community focus. He believes that Australian designers, by contrast, favor the public realm and inclusiveness, particularly the street as an active space and the park as an equitable place for all. This is perhaps one reason for our enjoyment of the intensity of street life and park activities in older Chinese neighborhoods. Chinese clients and peers are often mystified by this interest in the commonplace practices of ordinary folk while they revere the elite and rare forms of Chinese culture. Brearley believes that the shared beliefs of Australians in ideas such as inclusivity combined with playfulness produces Australian design work that aims to address the needs of a broad range of social groups in Chinese society, from children to retirees, shop owners to farmers, fitness fanatics to those with disabilities. Furthermore, he suggests that while Chinese urban parks are highly contained and manicured wherever possible, Australian designers bring with them a desire for wilder, random spaces in their design work. Blending these two approaches is now becoming far more common in Chinese public open spaces.

Community – Artistic Focus

Some Australian companies established offices in China up to ten years ago. Many have disappeared but some have remained and thrived. These firms bring Australian expertise to China but also contribute to the growing profession here.

Mark Burgess, Director of PLACE Design Group, believes that the Chinese market has changed a great deal over the past decade. Initially greater importance seemed to be given to the design work of foreigners and the marketability of foreign firms. However with the huge expansion of Chinese cities and a wealthy middle class who travel extensively, the market has matured. There is a deeper appreciation of what good design and planning can bring to development projects and new urban communities.

Burgess believes that our attitudes to public space and a community focus are at the forefront of what Australian landscape architects bring to China. Foreign landscape architects generally are much more focused on the ability of a space to have more than an artistic value. They add to the quality of people's lives by creating opportunity for recreation and interaction on all levels and scales.

Watery Places – A Common Ground

The strongest connection between Australia and China is most likely water-related landscape design and planning, particularly in terms of environmental challenges, cultural heritage and future development directions. Michael Erickson, Managing Principal at EADG, believes our common ground will involve water. Our continental land masses cover similar climatic conditions. Our urban populations broadly live near the coast or in fertile farming areas and our scarce water resources are essential to our economic livelihoods. Erickson states that significant changes in new waterfront landscapes are being led by regional cities in China. They are bound by a common desire for cities and new communities to rediscover their traditional dependency on their historical lifeblood – the river, lake or sea - and to celebrate this in a long serving manner based on local culture and global experience.

Aligning Professional Goals

While practice differences between Australia and China are numerous, it is critical to identify our common professional goals and future strategic directions in landscape architecture. The diversity of projects undertaken in China and the relatively high status afforded to landscape architects in the planning and development cycle, often in the principal role, give our profession huge scope for innovation and expansion. Landscape architects in both countries can deal with extreme scale variations from national park planning to courtyard gardens. Furthermore, Michael suggests that we hold strongly shared aspirational goals, namely:

- a growing passion for quality;
- the importance of culture and leaving a memory; and
- the promotion of innovation and creativity.

Landscape design and planning are evolving into a new and enhanced field through Chinese projects. It is one in which Australian landscape architects can engage collaboratively and help further the profession's rapid development in China. Sustained attention to a strong common ground for Australian – Chinese collaboration may have important implications for both countries in the future.